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SUBJECT: SAYID AMAR AL-HAKIM AND GOVERNOR AL-TAIE DISCUSS ELECTIONS, OTHER ISSUES WITH THE AMBASSADOR IN NAJAF

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CLASSIFIED BY: Ryan C. Crocker, AMBASSADOR, PRT Najaf, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: On February 17, Najaf Governor Asad Abu Gelal al-Taie organized a series of meetings to welcome the Ambassador in Najaf that included a meeting with Amar al-Hakim (son and heir apparent of Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq leader Abd al-Aziz Hakim), a luncheon with 30 Najaf notables and officials and a meeting with leading Najaf Shi'a sheiks, and ended with an impromptu press conference attended by 50 local media members. Subjects discussed included a bigger role for local councils, women's increasing involvement in political affairs, and tribal desires to be formally recognized. Hakim noted that October elections are "possible," although the key would be when "conditions are right." Hakim stressed the need to have an independent, fair, and unbiased election commission that will observe the election process, noting also that he supported UN assistance. The atmosphere was very positive, with Najaf leaders expressing eagerness for a more robust relationship. The Ambassador's inaugural meetings in Najaf are major steps forward for the USG with the province. END SUMMARY.

Sayid Amar al-Hakim

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¶12. (C) During the Ambassador's visit to Najaf on February 17, Sayid (an honorific title for descendants of the Prophet Mohammed) Amar Al-Hakim was gracious, polished, and poised in welcoming the Ambassador. In a brief second meeting before departure, Hakim's deputy Sayid Hassan al-Hakim also joined the meeting. (Note: Hassan appears to run the daily affairs of the al-Hakim Foundation; Hassan is a "close relative" of Amar Hakim. End Note.) Responding to Hakim's question about what kind of changes he had seen, the Ambassador noted that this was his first visit to Najaf as Ambassador and his first since 2003. He noted that he saw a lot of projects and construction, as well as tourism, having passed through the city where Arbaeen pilgrims were already en route in large numbers. (Note: While we saw a number of billboards and posters depicting Muqtada al-Sadr and his late father along the bustling road leading into central Najaf, the only signs or posters depicting the Hakims were found inside Amar's sprawling compound.) When the Ambassador offered congratulations on passing the budget, Hakim replied that it was good that the budget had been produced, but what mattered more was when results are delivered. Hakim noted although political dialogue produced benefits, there were still some contradictions regarding the local governance law -- the Governor chimed in, stating that it was unclear how one could remove a governor or

dissolve a provincial council. There were unresolved contradictions between the central government authorities and the Provincial Council's right to approve all plans. Hakim added with a twinkle that PM Malaki had often complained about the Ambassador's criticism of the dead hand of central government control, but Hakim opined that he agreed with the Ambassador because it limits the Provinces.

¶3. (C) When the Ambassador asked if elections would occur in October, Hakim pronounced that expediting the approval of the election law was good. However, without clear guidelines, he said, "it would just be like those people asking foreign forces to leave Iraq -- you have to have the right conditions." (Comment: He was clearly injecting this point as part of the conversation to highlight the message of ISCI's support for the framework agreement. End comment.) An election that divides the country will not be helpful, he opined, adding that elections could be held around October 1, but would need a lot of effort and UN support, which he specifically endorsed. Hakim said it was a good decision by the election commission to remove the people in place during the last elections. He added that it was not possible to have elections when people are terrified -- that people must be free to make campaign speeches and it was more important to have good elections than setting a particular date. The Ambassador agreed and noted that having the right climate for elections is important, and that decisions concerning the election have to be Iraqi decisions.

¶4. (C) When Hakim expressed his appreciation for the Ambassador's visit to Najaf, stressing in particular the Ambassador's direct contact with the people of Najaf, he touched on the topic of the U.S. election campaign. Hakim made it clear that he and his followers are following closely the U.S. election. Hakim expressed the hope that the next American President would understand the situation in Iraq.

Meeting with Najaf Notables

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¶5. (SBU) Hakim and Governor Asad then led the Ambassador to a meeting with a group of prominent representative of Najaf society that included Deputy Governor Abtan, Provincial Council Chair Musawi, the President and faculty members of Kufa University, women representatives from the al-Hakim Foundation, the PC Women's Committee Chair, IP Chief Abdul Karim Mustafa, FSB head MG Rubaie, DGs, the Chamber of Commerce Chair, and others. Deputy Governor Abtan noted that Najaf had only received USD 150 million from the central government the previous year, which was far less than what Najaf needed, and urged the Ambassador to exercise his good offices to encourage the central government to be more responsive. The DG of Agriculture requested similar support with the Ministry of Agriculture. MG Rubaie reported that his force had 5,000 members but had received only 150 rifles from MOI. The police chief stressed the importance of human rights and prosecuting criminals, but noted that Najaf did not have the tools it needed, including a forensic laboratory. Ambassador Crocker responded that it was a mark of the progress from the Saddam era that the police chief would begin a comment by stressing the importance of human rights. The President of Kufa University outlined plans for the new Najaf University and his eagerness for academic and international exchanges.

Women's Affairs in Najaf

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¶6. (SBU) Najaf PC Women's Affairs Committee Chairperson Majida Shanno, who also manages the office of women's affairs for the al-Hakim Foundation, took the floor to state that she was a PC member and part of the political process, and that there were many women organizations in Najaf. Whereas women were marginalized before, she insisted that this was the case no longer and that women now have the freedom to make choices. She noted that Western media does not always cover the right

image of women's role in Iraq society. She asked the Ambassador to convey the new role of women in Iraqi society "to the whole world." "We feel respect from the Marja'iyyah and from our political party," she stated. Shannoons intervention drew enthusiastic applause from the other participants.

Meeting with Shi'a Sheikhs - No need for Concerned Local Citizens Groups (CLCs)

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¶ 7. (SBU) The Governor (Hakim did not participate) then hosted a meeting for Ambassador Crocker with senior Shi'a sheikhs of Najaf. The Governor asked the sheiks not to be overly polite or flatter the government, but rather to describe the situation in their regions. Sheikh Ahdi noted that the old regime was a disease that would have extended to the whole region. The sheikhs stated that they had always praised the American role (in ridding Iraq of Saddam) and defended American actions against those who labeled Americans as "occupiers." They had welcomed the U.S. role, but noted that their areas faced many problems and expressed frustration with the level of services available in their tribal areas. They are aware of the financial support the Sunni sheikhs have received, and would like to receive similar support. They were quick to note, however, that their areas are not "hot" areas and claim there are no terrorists in Najaf so they do not need "Awakening Council" support, but nonetheless the tribes are suffering from unemployment and are looking for a variety of support for education, electricity, services, and agriculture (seeds and fertilizer). Sheikh Omar Al Khafaji complained that there was a gap between the national administration and the citizens that needed to be shored up. In particular, he noted that members of his community had not been paid for crops they provided since February of 2007. (Deputy Governor Abtan took careful notes as Khafaji spoke.) Many of the sheikhs took the opportunity to also advocate particular projects for their area, including renovation of Najaf's SOE tire factory and a "George Washington" power generation facility.

¶ 8. (SBU) In his reply to the tribal sheikhs, the Ambassador stated there was no doubt of the importance of the role the tribes play, and commended them for the moderate directions they were taking their people. He noted that the USG has spent USD 260 million in the Najaf region since 2004 on water, electricity and other projects. However, the result of twenty-five years of war and deterioration meant that there were a lot of problems which had only begun to be addressed five years ago. The Ambassador noted that our role is now smaller in comparison with the federal and provincial governments of Iraq, but that the PRT would have expertise, for example, in agriculture and education, and would want to work with tribal leaders. He thanked the ISF and the tribes for their role in promoting security, and added that with security, everything was possible. Citing educational

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developments such as Kufa University, affirming support for the Najaf Airport project, and noting the growing potential of the tourist industry, the Ambassador noted that there are great prospects for foreign and domestic investment which will fuel economic growth in Najaf. The Ambassador noted that he visited Najaf at the invitation of the Governor, to become better informed, because of the great importance of the province. Ambassador Crocker added that he would like to continue working with the tribal leaders and wanted to continue his dialogue with the sheikhs so that we keep an accurate picture of conditions in their area.

The Al-Hakim Foundation

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¶ 9. (SBU) On the margins of the meetings, PRTOFF met with Hassan al-Hakim and female PC Member Majida, both active members of the Al-Hakim Foundation, to be briefed on the organization. The foundation, Moaassasat Shaheed al-Mehrab in Arabic, was named in honor of the brother of Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, Mohamed Baqar al-Hakim, who was killed in 2003 in an explosion outside the

Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf.

¶10. (C) Majida, who heads "women's affairs" at the organization, proudly announced that the al-Hakim Foundation is registered with the United Nations. Sayid Hassan explained that funding is provided by the UN, as well as "wealthy Shi'a merchants," including many Iranian donors. The organization can best be summarized as a religious organization that supports Islamic education, but is also involved in a wide array of activities that reach out to all levels of society. As an example, Majida stated that the foundation has 1,500 women under its "general Islamic education" program, and the program is also helping to prepare them to participate in the political process and decision-making. The foundation owns a religious university -- al-Tossi University -- that Sayid Hasan claimed to be one of the most revered Shi'a religious schools. It comprises 1,000 educators and 5,000 "preachers" -- to "make up for lost time" of the past regime, when they were prohibited from preaching. Sayid Hassan underscored that during Saddam's times, no one Shi'a group was allowed to claim association with a specific marjariya, or religious head, and the foundation was first to break this barrier. Ahmed Al-Hakim, son of Amar al-Hakim, also introduced himself to the PRT on the margins of the meetings.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: The Government of Najaf clearly made an effort to highlight the Ambassador's visit. The Governor arranged a well-attended joint press conference as a final event, which received very positive press play, ensuring that Najaf citizens were fully aware of the visit, and the location of the meetings at the al-Hakim Foundation, leaving citizens no doubt that this visit was also welcomed by the Marja'iyyah. END COMMENT.

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